



The Melchizedek Priesthood was restored to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery by Peter, James, and John. (Walter Rane, Restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All rights reserved.)

Richard E. Bennett

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“THE CIRCUMFERENCE OF THE APOSTLESHIP”

IN Robert Bolt’s classic drama *A Man for All Seasons*, the ever-principled and incomparable Thomas More, England’s stout defender of the Holy Catholic faith, responded with unflinching conviction when pressed by the Duke of Norfolk about the reasonability and historicity of the Roman Catholic claim to priesthood legitimacy. “The Apostolic Succession of the Pope is—Why, it’s a theory yes; you can’t see it; can’t touch it; it’s a theory. But what matters to me is not whether it’s true or not but that I believe it to be true, or rather not that I *believe* it, but that *I* believe it.”¹

My intention is to discuss the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood. Of course, only Latter-day Saints believe in this modern-day miracle, and one must realize that expecting others to believe in such a thing would first require a conversion to the restored gospel as

Richard E. Bennett is associate dean of Religious Education and professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.

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we see and understand it. For those unacquainted with the miraculous, or for those unprepared to accept angelic visitations, this discussion is in the field of mere speculation and pure fantasy. Likewise, our friends in other Christian faiths, most notably those of the noble Roman Catholic persuasion, will consider such talk uncomfortable and certainly antithetical to a central tenet of their faith: the apostolic succession from St. Peter. It takes time, preparation, and faith to believe that Christ called Peter, James, and John as his Apostles, let alone to accept the uniquely Mormon doctrine that they were instrumental in restoring lost priesthood authority and the attendant keys in these latter days.

The specific details of the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood are admittedly difficult to ferret out. In Joseph Smith's 1832 history, he mentioned "the reception of the Holy Priesthood by the ministering of angels" but offered no other specifics. In his official history of 1838, he stated that John the Baptist "acted under the direction of Peter, James and John who held the keys of the Priesthood of Melchizedek, which Priesthood he said would in due time be conferred on us." In this same account, he offered a clue to his silence on the matter: "In the meantime we were forced to keep secret the circumstances of having received the Priesthood and our having been baptized, owing to a spirit of persecution which had already manifested itself in the neighborhood."² Considering the intense persecution that followed his telling of the First Vision story, such reluctance may be understandable.

Harder to comprehend is the fact that Lucy Mack Smith did not write much about the event in her writings, nor did David Whitmer or William E. McLellin. As Michael Quinn has argued, Whitmer said that he never heard "of such a thing as an angel ordaining them until I got into Ohio about the year 1834—or later" and purportedly concluded that "I do not believe that John the Baptist ever ordained Joseph and Oliver as stated and believed by some."³ William E. McLellin, who, like David Whitmer, later left the Church, said, "In 1831 I heard Joseph tell his experiences about angel visits many times, and about finding the plates, and their contents

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coming to light. . . . But I never heard one word of John the baptist, or of Peter, James, and John’s visit and ordination till I was told some year afterward in Ohio.”⁴ Quinn has even argued that Brigham Young, as President of the Church, later stated that Joseph Smith “received the Melchizedek Priesthood” after the Church was organized.⁵

It has also been argued, by Hiram Page and others, that Joseph Smith was merely “a prophet” rather than “the prophet” and that at first “nearly everyone regarded Smith as a prophet among prophets, not as *the* prophet.”⁶ Certainly, David Whitmer later seemed to arrive at such a conclusion, perhaps to justify leaving the Church. Furthermore, he and others argued that the term “apostle” as used in the very early days of the Church was not an administrative office but a term suggesting a charismatic calling for those who had received special manifestations of the Spirit—David Whitmer, John Whitmer, Ziba Peterson, and others—and that they felt comfortable claiming the title “apostle” (lowercase “a”) independent of any ordination or priesthood setting apart.⁷

Unless additional information is discovered, we simply do not know precisely when or where the Melchizedek Priesthood was restored. Until that time, reputable scholars will probably continue to defend alternative positions with some intent in arguing that such a manifestation never occurred, that it was later contrived to justify the legitimacy of priesthood claim by later leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The purpose of this paper is to reexamine what we do know about this remarkable event in Church history. Whatever the contrary positions may be, the early missionaries of the Church taught the Apostasy and its tragic loss of authority as a terrible reality. They also spoke clearly about the restoration of priesthood authority. Furthermore, the second witness of the Restoration, Oliver Cowdery, as well as many members of the original Quorum of the Twelve asserted that (a) the vision of Peter, James, and John was a reality; (b) the gift of the Holy Ghost could not have been conferred without the Melchizedek Priesthood; (c) such authority had to have been restored before the Church was organized at Fayette, New York, on April 6, 1830;

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and finally and perhaps most importantly, (d) the visit of Peter, James, and John included the restoration of priesthood keys, that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were ordained to the office of Apostle (capital “A”) before the Quorum of the Twelve had been organized—and that by right of this ordination, Joseph Smith laid claim to the right of President of the Church, thereby establishing the pattern of apostolic succession.

“THE BLINDNESS THAT HAD HAPPENED”

One cannot discuss the restoration of priesthood authority without first reviewing what early missionaries taught about the Apostasy and the original Christian Church. With the Church still in its infancy, many of its newest converts sought to spread the word while gathering to Zion. Jonathan Crosby, for instance, prayed that “the Lord would rend the heavens and come down, and remove the darkness which covers the earth, and gross darkness the minds of the people.”⁸ Among the doctrines these earliest converts preached, the Apostasy was prominent, if not paramount.⁹ Teachings about the Apostasy included the loss of truth, resultant false religion, the absence of authority, and the scattering of Israel.

The early missionaries spoke of the Apostasy in very strident tones. They taught that it was a reality, long prophesied and now fulfilled, that the Christian world had lost its way and that the results of the Apostasy were spiritually and morally devastating. Samuel Smith, Joseph’s younger brother wrote: “I have written . . . to prove that the Gentiles have broken the everlasting covenant and that darkness has covered the earth since the days of the Apostles and to show the calamity that is coming upon them and to prove that while in this situation, the Lord was to lift up a standard to the people which should . . . come forth to throw light into the minds of the people and to deliver them from the darkness that happened unto them and to show the way of deliverance from the judgments that are coming upon the Gentiles.”¹⁰ He then reported how Elder Orson Hyde spoke of “the blindness that had happened in consequence of the falling away from the faith that was delivered to the Saints.”¹¹ And Sylvester Smith, writing

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in May 1833 from his missionary assignment in southern New York, added the following:

I am sensible that the word will not grow and flourish upon the barren rocks of pride and unbelief, which is almost the only characteristic of the old churches.

When I view the situation of the sectarians of the day, my heart cries, wo, wo, wo, to the scribes and pharisees, hypocrites, who build and garnish the sepulchers of the apostles! but alas! Their building upon the old covenant, will not save them if they reject the new! Their crying out against the murderers of Christ and his apostles, will not save them, while they stone those whom the Lord sends to warn them of the desolation which await the wicked!¹²

In 1834, William McLellan quoted from Jude 1:3 when he addressed a congregation “about an hour and ¼ on the situation or confusion of the world and on the faith once delivered to the saints.”¹³ In another account, Orson Hyde referenced the same scripture to “show them the blindness that had happened in consequence of the falling away from the faith that was once delivered to the Saints.”¹⁴ Said W. W. Phelps in 1834: “The world . . . was to wander far from God, and righteousness was so far to depart from the earth and the true principles of the religion of heaven to be so neglected, as to leave the world in a state of apostasy. . . . Isaiah says in [60:2], ‘For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people.’ . . . Any man who will read this . . . will see . . . it was at this time, that darkness was to cover the earth and gross darkness the minds of the people.”¹⁵

Elder Orson Pratt, who had proselyted actively since late 1830, summarized his teachings of the Apostasy and of “the falling away of the Church” of Christ,¹⁶ and the fact that “there could not but one church be correct.”¹⁷ In the following jubilant letter of 1835, he wrote to Oliver Cowdery: “Who could have supposed five years ago that truth would have spread so rapid . . . it moves in majesty and power, and continues its steady course, pulling down the strong holds of Babylon, and leaving her mighty towers, exposing

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the creeds, systems and inventions of men, exhibiting the extreme ignorance, follies and errors of all sects, which causes their priests to rage and their mighty ones to tremble.”¹⁸

Elder Parley P. Pratt admitted: “At the commencement of 1830, I felt drawn out in an extraordinary manner to search the prophets, and to pray for an understanding of the same. . . . I began to understand the things which were coming on the earth—the restoration of Israel, the coming of the Messiah, and the glory that should follow. I was so astonished at the darkness of myself and mankind on these subjects that I could exclaim with the prophet: surely, *‘darkness covers the earth, and gross darkness the minds of the people.’*”¹⁹

The early missionaries believed that the Apostasy had thoroughly corrupted virtually all of mankind. And because of it, “surely, gross darkness covers the earth, and wickedness greatly prevails among the people, and the truth makes them angry, for they are joined to their idols.”²⁰ The Apostasy was something far more than a loss of truth or even priesthood; it was the ushering in of a time of sin and corruption, a terrible state of affairs which these early missionaries viewed as confirmation of that calamity. Such talk of the Apostasy begged the need for a restoration of priesthood authority and priesthood keys that were necessary to change mankind for the better.

“THE FIRST LIGHT OF THE MORNING”

Of all aspects of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s early visions, the ones shared most by early missionaries were the visitations of the angel Moroni, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and the restoration of priesthood authority.

A careful review of early missionary journals indicates that priesthood restoration was not as much preached as other topics were, at least not explicitly. For instance, several spoke of the “authority” of the revelations Joseph Smith had received and less about their own authority. And little seemed to be said about the specific visits of John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John. Nevertheless, priesthood and its restoration were important points

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of discussion. For instance, William E. McLellin wrote in May 1833, “To-day I preached in the schoolhouse to a tolerably large congregation, on the Priesthood, on the operation of the Holy spirit and on the nature of communion.”²¹ Later he spoke on “the confusion on the earth” and “on the plainness of the Gospel and on the Authority which God has given to his church.”²² And in one setting he preached “on the dealings of God with men, on the plainness of the Gospel and on the two Priesthoods.”²³

Elder Orson Pratt wrote in July 1833, during one of his earliest missions, “I preached upon the Priesthood and more revelations and miracles, the 29th of Isaiah and the two sticks.”²⁴ In March 1834, he and Elder Orson Hyde read from the Articles and Covenants of the Church (now found in section 20 of the Doctrine of the Covenants) with its emphasis on priesthood ordinations, quorums, and responsibilities and went on to give them “a proclamation of the first principles of the Gospel.”²⁵ He went on to “prove from the scriptures that miracles, gifts of healings, prophecies, revelations, and all the spiritual gifts which were in the Church in the days of the Savior and Apostles were necessary for the Church of Christ now, and that there never was nor ever will be a true church on the earth in a state of mortality without them.”²⁶ Implicit in their many discussions on the first principles and performances of baptism was the doctrine of the restored priesthood.

And in the specific charge to Parley P. Pratt on the eve of his mission to the Eastern States in 1835, “President” Oliver Cowdery said, “Brethren, you have your duty presented in this revelation. You have been ordained to the holy priesthood; you have received it from those who have their power and authority from an angel; you are to preach the gospel to every nation.”²⁷ And when preaching to John Taylor and others in Toronto, Upper Canada, Pratt reasoned as follows: “How often the Lord may have restored his priesthood and ordinances, the true Church and its gifts to the earth, among the humble, is not known. But this much we know, . . . nothing short of a new dispensation—a new revelation to commission apostles as at the first could give any religious body a claim, or a shadow of claim, to be the Church of Jesus Christ, or entitle them to the spiritual gifts.”²⁸

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And by 1851 we read the following: “The first light of the morning, in this age, and the time referred to by the Savior, was the angel who had the everlasting Gospel, which was to be preached to all people, preaching and ministering . . . to others, even as he had received of the angel; and the light continued to shine and spread, as others believed on the testimony of Joseph, for they repented of their sins, and were baptized by him; and he, having received the Holy Priesthood from the angels, conferred the same Priesthood on the believers.”²⁹

THE WITNESS OF OLIVER COWDERY

More specific to the restoration of the “two priesthoods,” Oliver Cowdery wrote the following just two years before his return to the Church:

I have cherished a hope, and that one of my fondest, that I might leave such a character, as those who might believe in my testimony, after that I should be called hence, might do so, not only for the sake of the truth, but might not *blush* for the private character of the man who bore that testimony. I have been sensitive on this subject, I admit; but I ought to be so—you would be, under the circumstances, had you stood in the presence of John, with our departed Brother Joseph, to receive the Lesser Priesthood—and in the presence of Peter, to receive the Greater, and looked down through time, and witnessed the effects these two must produce,—you would feel what you have never felt, were wicked men conspiring to lessen the effects of your testimony on man, after you should have gone to your long sought rest.³⁰

Ten years after leaving the Church, Cowdery arrived in Kanesville, Iowa, in 1848 and sought permission to enter in the door of baptism and be restored to membership. Elder George A. Smith, in a letter to Elder Orson Pratt in October 1848, described Oliver’s comments this way:

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Oliver Cowdery, who had just arrived from Wisconsin with family, addressed the meeting. He bore testimony in the most positive terms of the truth of the Book of Mormon—the restoration of the priesthood to the earth and the mission of Joseph Smith as the Prophet of the last days; and told the people if they wanted to follow the right path to keep the main channel of the stream—where the body of the church goes, there is the authority; and all these lo here’s and lo there’s, have no authority; but this people have the true and holy Priesthood; for the angel said unto Joseph Smith, Jr., in his hearing, that “this priesthood shall remain on the earth until the end!” His testimony produced quite a stir among the gentlemen present, who did not belong to the church, and it was gratefully received by all the Saints.³¹

Cowdery gave even more precise details of the restoration of two priesthoods in a follow-up letter to Samuel W. Richards in 1849. “While darkness covered the earth and gross darkness the people,” he wrote:

long after the authority to administer in holy things had been taken away, the Lord opened the heavens and sent forth his word for the salvation of Israel. In fulfillment of the sacred Scripture the everlasting Gospel was proclaimed by the mighty angel (Moroni), who, clothed with the authority of his mission, gave glory to God in the highest. This Gospel is the “stone taken from the mountain without hands.” John the Baptist, holding the keys of the Aaronic Priesthood; Peter, James and John, holding the keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood, have also ministered for those who shall be heirs of salvation, and with these ministrations ordained men to the same Priesthoods. These Priesthoods with their authority, are now, and must continue to be, in the body of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Blessed is the elder who has received the same and thrice blessed and holy is he who shall endure to the

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end. Accept assurances . . . of him who, in connection with Joseph the Seer, was blessed with the above ministrations.³²

Oliver Cowdery died soon after these testimonials as a member of the Church he helped establish. It was a deliberate act on his part to come back and to bear testimony to what he had seen and heard—the restoration of both the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods. His personal integrity would allow him to do no less.

THE GIFT OF THE HOLY GHOST

After Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery had baptized one another under the direction of John the Baptist, each began to prophesy, although neither had yet received the gift of the Holy Ghost. “Accordingly we went and were baptized, I baptized him first, and afterwards he baptized me. . . . The messenger . . . said . . . he acted under the direction of Peter, James and John, who held the keys of the Priesthood of Melchizedek, which Priesthood, he said, would in due time be conferred on us.” Immediately after their baptism, the Holy Ghost fell upon them, and Oliver prophesied “many things which should shortly come to pass,” and Joseph prophesied “concerning the rise of this Church, and many other things connected with the Church, and this generation of the children of men.” They then “began to have the scriptures laid open” to their understanding, “and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed in a manner which we never could attain to previously” (Joseph Smith—History 1:71–74). Even though they had used the Urim and Thummim as a remarkable instrument of translation and revelation, it was now the Holy Ghost that began to instruct them in marvelous ways.

But they had not yet received the gift of the Holy Ghost. “He [John the Baptist] said this Aaronic Priesthood had not the power of laying on hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, but that this should be conferred on us hereafter” (Joseph Smith—History 1:70), a clear indication that a further priesthood endowment was forthcoming. As simple as it may appear, they

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looked forward to the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood as the essential prerequisite to receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, without which no officer in the Church could be called or established, or lasting testimony secured.

According to revelation given the day the Church was organized, Joseph Smith had been “inspired of the Holy Ghost to lay the foundation thereof, and to build it up unto the most holy faith” (D&C 21:2). And again, as per the Articles and Constitution of the Church (D&C 20), no officer in the new Church—whether elder, priest, teacher, or deacon—could have been ordained unless “by the power of the Holy Ghost, which *is in the one* who ordains him” (D&C 20:60; emphasis added). Put another way, there could have been no ordinations and no Church without first the bestowal of the gift of the Holy Ghost upon the first and second elders. As President George Q. Cannon much later remarked, “[Joseph] was unable to seal the gift of the Holy Ghost or to ordain an elder, until after Peter, James and John had endowed him with the priesthood after the holy order of Melchizedek.”³³

Unlike their baptism under the direction of John the Baptist, Joseph and Oliver recorded very little about the formal bestowal of the Holy Ghost upon them. If, however, Peter, James, and John acted in accordance with the previous pattern, they would have first conferred the Melchizedek Priesthood upon both men and then directed them to ordain one another and bestow upon each other the gift of the Holy Ghost by the power and authority of their newly received priesthood.³⁴

THE VOICE OF PETER, JAMES, AND JOHN

If this matter of the Holy Ghost attains, it stands to reason that the Melchizedek Priesthood was restored some time before the organization of the Church. The exact date and place of the restoration of this higher priesthood authority, in what B. H. Roberts has called the “fourth vision” of the Restoration, have yet to be discovered; however, there are clues. As Professor Larry C. Porter has skillfully argued, it was likely restored near

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Harmony, Pennsylvania, for Oliver Cowdery wrote of hearing “the voice of Peter, James, and John in the wilderness between Harmony, Susquehanna county, and Colesville, Broome county, on the Susquehanna river, declaring themselves as possessing the keys of the kingdom, and of the dispensation of the fulness of times” (D&C 128:20). Just where the spot was between Harmony and Colesville, New York, a distance of twenty-seven miles, is impossible to say.³⁵

In a now-famous 1882 letter to President Joseph F. Smith, Addison Everett, a bishop in Winter Quarters and later in Salt Lake City, recalled hearing the Prophet in Nauvoo relate the circumstances surrounding the restoration of the priesthood. “Said as they ware tran[s]lating the Book of Mormon at His Father In Laws in Susqauhanah County Penny. T[h]ey ware thretned By a Mob and in the same time Falther Kn[i]ghts came Down from Cole[s]vill[e] County New York and Desired them to go home with him and preach to them in his Neighbourhood And on Account of the Mob Spirit prevailing they concluded to goe.” Everett recalled that even in Colesville persecution continued, forcing the pair to return to Harmony. His letter continues:

And they wandered in a dense Forest all night and often times in Mud and water up to thare Knees. And Brother Oliver got quite exhausted in the After Part of the Night and Brother Joseph had to put his arm arround him and allmost carry him. And Just as the day Broke in the East Brother Oliver gave out Entirely and he[,] Br Joseph[,] leaned him against an Oake tree Just out side a field fenc[e] Br Oliver Crying out how long O Lord O how Long Br Joseph hav[e] we got to suffer these things[?] Just this moment Peter James & John came to us and Ordained [us to] the Holy Apostleship and gave [unto] us the Keys of the Disp[e]nsation of the fullness of times. And we had some 16 or 17 miles to goe to reach our place of residence and Brother Oliver could travel as well as I could . . . Now as to time and Place. I heard the Name of the Banks of the Susquehanah river spoken [of] But whare it was

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pla[c]ed I cannot till. No doubt the Oake tree and the field fence was ajacent to the river. As to time I cannot Be Very Explsit. But as the Mob spirit had not abated when they returned they had to remove to Father Whitmores [Whitmers] [Fayette, Seneca Co] to finish the Translation.³⁶

How much credence can be given to a reminiscence written almost forty years after the fact is debatable. Nonetheless, it is true that the Knights assisted in the translation of the Book of Mormon by supplying paper and provisions, that persecution attended the translation, that by June 1, 1829, Joseph and Oliver had removed north to Harmony, and that the two were never together again in the wilderness of the Susquehanna.

And further to the matter of timing, revelations from as early as June 1829 speak of Joseph and Oliver having already received the apostleship. “And I speak unto you, even as unto Paul mine apostle, for you are called even with that same calling with which he was called” (D&C 18:9). In the Articles and Covenants of the Church—section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants—reference is made to Joseph and Oliver as having already been “called of God, and ordained an Apostle of Jesus Christ” *before* the Church was organized on April 6, 1830 (D&C 20:2).³⁷

THE KEYS OF THE APOSTLESHIP

A careful reading of scriptural text and of the statements of the earliest Church Apostles reveals that Joseph and Oliver received from Peter, James, and John something even more than priesthood authority: they also received the “keys” pertaining to and governing that priesthood. While some may err in thinking that this is unnecessary nuance and an overly subtle differentiation, it is of great importance to distinguish the two, for the keys meant everything to Church government, the matter of apostolic succession, and even the timing or chronology of the coming of Peter, James, and John.

If priesthood is Christ’s authority delegated unto man to perform ordinances, miracles, and other works in his stead, then keys represent the

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governing authority, the power over the priesthood, the permitting or consenting power to direct, confirm, revoke, and be accountable for all matters of ecclesiastical administration and ordination. The keys may also represent sealing powers that “whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven” (Matthew 18:18).

Just as Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery had obtained not only the Aaronic Priesthood from John the Baptist but also the “keys” pertaining thereto, they received from the Apostles Peter, James, and John the keys of the apostleship which they themselves possessed. Possessing the keys to the Melchizedek Priesthood, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were prepared to enter into the operation, ordinances, and government of that priesthood. They could baptize not only for the remission of sins but also into Church membership, being able to *confer* the gift of the Holy Ghost to baptized believers and to *confirm* them members of the Church. So too they could set apart and ordain other officers in the Church.

Section 27, given in August 1830, states:

And also with Peter, and James, and John, whom I have sent unto you, by whom I have ordained you and confirmed you to be apostles, and especial witnesses of my name, and bear the *keys* of your ministry and of the *same things* which I revealed unto them;

Unto whom I have committed the keys of my kingdom, and a dispensation of the gospel for the last times; and for the fulness of times, in the which I will gather together in one all things, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth. (D&C 27:12–13; emphasis added)

The “same things” which God had revealed unto his ancient Apostles, the same powers, commissions, and endowments given unto them were now to be entrusted with these modern Apostles. Joseph and Oliver were to be more than mere disciples or followers, but Apostles, leaders, and directors over the work of the Lord in this, the final time, or dispensation, before Christ’s Second Coming.

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This argument was presented by many of the early Apostles of this Church. The Articles and Covenants, originally published in the Book of Commandments,³⁸ speaks of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery having been “called of God and ordained an apostle of Jesus Christ, an elder of this church” (D&C 20:2). Their ordination to the apostleship preceded their being called, set apart, and sustained by the membership at the inauguration of the Church on April 6 in Fayette, New York. In fact, they could not have become the first or second presiding elders over the Church or could not have organized and established the Church without first having been Apostles. At least this is how many of the original Quorum of the Twelve came to understand the process. The argument that the original Apostles, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, were mere disciples, not much different than any other early leaders in an egalitarian forum of charismatic coequals does not square with statements made by the original Twelve. Elder Parley P. Pratt, a member of the original Quorum of the Twelve and a member of the Church since 1830, responded this way: “Who ordained our first founders to the Apostleship, to hold the keys of the kingdom of God, in these the times of restoration? Peter, James, and John, from the eternal world.”³⁹ Added Elder Heber C. Kimball, another original Quorum member: “Joseph Smith was a Prophet of God, a Seer, a Revelator, an Apostle of Jesus, and was ordained directly under the hands of Peter, James, and John.”⁴⁰

Brigham Young, while President of the Church, elaborated further on the perfect sequence of events so far discussed and on the order and importance of the priesthood and its keys:

When the Lord called upon His servant Joseph, after leading him along for years until he got the plates, from a portion of which the Book of Mormon was translated, “by and bye,” said he, “you are going to organize my church and establish my kingdom. I am going to have a church on the earth. All these churches you have inquired about are wrong; they have truth amongst them, but not the Priesthood. They lack a guide to direct the affairs of the Kingdom of God on the earth—that is the keys of the priesthood of the Son

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of God.” This tells the story. We possess the Priesthood. The Lord sent John to ordain Joseph to the Aaronic Priesthood, and when he commenced to baptize people he sent a greater power—Peter, James, and John, who ordained him to the apostleship, which is the highest office pertaining to the Kingdom of God that any man can possess on the face of the earth, for it holds the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and has power to dispense the blessings of the kingdom.⁴¹

In light of the fact that the Quorum of the Twelve was not formed until 1835, it is significant that men in large part chosen by Joseph Smith with the aid of the Three Witnesses received and were “ordained,” in President Young’s words, to the “office” of apostleship. In other words, President Young and most of his colleagues believed that there were Apostles before there was a Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, indeed *before* there was, or could have been, an organized Church. The argument that the government of the Church was a later self-imposition of authority to justify the claims of second-generation Church leaders and that Peter, James, and John gave them no special governing authority or commission disregards the statements of a great many original Church leaders.

Said Elder Orson Pratt, another original member of the Twelve: “This Church never could have arisen had the Lord stopped with the mere translation of the Book of Mormon and the restoration of the lesser priesthood. It is true that with the latter we could baptize, but it does not impart the power to confer the Holy Ghost; and that this Church might have the power to administer in every ordinance of the Gospel, the apostleship was again restored, which holds all the keys, authorities and powers to administer, not only in the outward ordinances, but also to confer the spirit of the living God.”⁴²

One of the finest and most comprehensive statements on the nature of this apostleship and of the sequence of events culminating in the final organization of the Church was given by yet another member of the original

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Quorum, President Brigham Young, who made this statement in 1853 while laying the cornerstone of the Salt Lake Temple:

I speak thus to show you the order of the Priesthood. We will now commence with the Apostleship—where Joseph commenced. Joseph was ordained an Apostle, that you can read and understand. After he was ordained to this office, then he had the right to organize, build up the kingdom of God, for he had committed unto him the *keys* of the *Priesthood*, which is after the order of Melchizedek, the *High priesthood*, which is after the order of the Son of God. And this, remember, *by being ordained an Apostle*.

Could he have built up the kingdom of God without first being an Apostle? No, he never could. The keys of the Eternal Priesthood, which is after the order of the Son of God, is comprehended by being an Apostle. All the Priesthood, all the keys, all the gifts, all the endowments, and everything preparatory to entering back into the presence of the Father and the Son, is in, composed of, circumscribed by, or I might say incorporated within the circumference of the Apostleship.

Now, who do we set, in the first place, to lay the Chief, the South East Corner Stone: the corner from whence light emanates to illuminate the whole fabric that is to be lighted? We begin with the First Presidency, with the Apostleship, for Joseph commenced, always, with the keys of the Apostleship; and he, by the voice of the people, presiding over the whole community of Latter Day Saints, officiated in the Apostleship, as the First President.

. . . I know that Joseph received his Apostleship from Peter, James and John, before a revelation on the subject was printed, and he never had a right to organize the Church before he was an Apostle.⁴³

Consequently, Joseph Smith was the “first,” “chief,” or senior Apostle *before* he was established, confirmed, and set apart as President of the

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Church. “Joseph Smith was the first Apostle of this Church, and was commanded of Jesus Christ to call and ordain other Apostles,” President Young later affirmed, and

these other Apostles are Apostles of Jesus Christ, and of Joseph Smith the chief Apostle of this last dispensation. . . . Joseph told us that Jesus was the Christ, the Mediator between God and man, and the Saviour of the world. He told us that there was no other name in the heavens nor under the heavens, neither could there be, by which mankind could be saved in the presence of the Father, but by and through the name and ministry of Jesus Christ, and the atonement he made on Mount Calvary. Joseph also told us that the Saviour requires strict obedience to all the commandments, ordinances and laws pertaining to his kingdom, and that if we would do this we should be made partakers of all the blessings promised in his Gospel.⁴⁴

While preparing for the reorganization of the First Presidency some three and a half years after the death of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young taught his fellow Apostles at Winter Quarters in December 1847 that the pattern of succession in the presidency was laid down at the very beginning. Joseph Smith could not have become president without first being an Apostle and in his case, the first Apostle or chief elder with the keys. President Young, with “seven thunders rolling within him,” said that as senior Apostle, now to become President in December 1847, he was doing nothing more than what his predecessor, Joseph Smith, had done seventeen years before, for the Twelve collectively had “received my kingdom” (D&C 136:41) and could govern and appoint.

During the intensive deliberations at Winter Quarters, President Young argued that it was past time for them to reorganize the First Presidency with him, as senior Apostle, as the next President and successor to Joseph Smith. Never one to campaign for the office, President Young nevertheless felt that government by a First Presidency was preferable to that of the

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Twelve for many scriptural and logistical reasons, efficiency being one of them. Because they collectively held the keys, they had the right to reorganize. “Oliver Cowdery ordained Joseph an apostle,” Brigham Young argued, and “Oliver [was] ordained an apostle by Joseph. They received their ordinations by Peter, James and John before there was a Church. . . . Peter, James and John constituted a First Presidency, Joseph said so many times.”⁴⁵ His convincing argument was that an election or an appointment of any other potential candidate could not preempt what was rightfully now his by ordination. “You can’t make me President: I am President; you can’t give me power because I [already] have it.”⁴⁶

Thus Brigham Young believed that the pattern of apostolic succession was established in the very ordination of Joseph Smith by Peter, James, and John: the senior Apostle becomes President of the Church upon his ordination as such with the unanimous approval of the remaining Twelve. And while others of the Twelve held to somewhat differing methods of succession, none contested that Joseph Smith had been first ordained an Apostle under the hands of Peter, James, and John before he became President of the Church.

S U M M A R Y

To summarize, the early missionaries of this Church taught repeatedly the reality and awful dimensions of the Apostasy and, because of it, the need for and reality of a restoration of priesthood authority—“two priest-hoods.” The return of the angel Moroni with his message of the Book of Mormon was likewise primary in their early messages, and while some have argued that very little was said about a higher priesthood being restored, a great many of the original members of the Quorum of the Twelve believed differently—that the return of Peter, James, and John and their restoration of priesthood and priesthood keys were prerequisite to the bestowal of the Holy Ghost, to the organization of the Church, to the ordination of all later priesthood officers, and to a proper understanding of the pattern of succession in the presidency. Furthermore, Joseph Smith could not have

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attained the Presidency of the Church without first being the senior Apostle of this dispensation. Such discussion has necessitated a reexamination of the timing of the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood, one which these early Apostles contended must have occurred at least sometime before the Church was organized in April 1830.

In the end, I suppose if one could find bushels of letters and statements about the return of Peter, James, and John and priesthood authority, it would not be convincing to those who are intent on asserting otherwise. Essentially, these are matters of faith made as historically reasonable as possible. Thus we return to paraphrase Thomas More: “The restoration of priesthood authority in our day?—Why, it’s a historical question yes; you can’t see it; can’t touch it; it’s a history. But what matters to me is not only whether it can or cannot be substantiated but that I believe it to be true, or rather not that I *believe* it, but that *I* believe it.”

NOTES

1. Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* (Toronto: Bellhaven House, 1960), 53.
2. Joseph Smith, comp., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 1:40, 43–44.
3. David Whitmer, interviewed by Zenos H. Gurley, January 14, 1885, in D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 19.
4. William E. McLellin statement, in Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, 19.
5. *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1865), 10:303, in Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, 26.
6. Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, 8.
7. See Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, 10–12.
8. Letter from Jonathan Crosby Jr., in *Evening and Morning Star*, August 1834, 181.
9. According to their diaries, twelve of sixteen missionaries who served in the period from 1830 to 1834 taught various elements of the Apostasy. The sixteen missionaries were Calvin Beebe, Jonathan Crosby Jr., Peter Dustin, William Draper, William Huntington, Joseph G. Hovey, Orson Hyde, Joel Hills Johnson, Wandle Mace,

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William E. McLellin, John Murdock, W. W. Phelps, Parley P. Pratt, Samuel H. Smith, Sylvester Smith, and Brigham Young.

10. Journal of Samuel H. Smith, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 22–23.
11. Journal of Samuel H. Smith, August 27, 1832, 17.
12. Sylvester Smith, “Letter from a Missionary Werving in Chenango Point, New York,” *Evening and Morning Star*, July 1833, 109.
13. *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836*, ed. Jan Shipps and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1994), August 31, 1834, 136.
14. Journal of Samuel H. Smith, August 27, 1832, 17.
15. *Evening and Morning Star*, June 1834, 162 and July 1834, 169. Again from Phelps: “In consequence of the religious world having lost the power of getting revelations for themselves they have fallen into their present state of confusion, each partly manufacturing duties for themselves. For instance, the Presbyterian, the Episcopalian, the Methodist, and the Catholic god with the god of some other sects, requires them, (or at least they think he does,) to sprinkle their children, while the Baptist . . . god is greatly offended with it.”
16. *The Orson Pratt Journals*, comp. Elden J. Watson (Salt Lake City: Elden Jay Watson, 1975), March 13, 1835, 52; and June 2, 1835, 65.
17. *Orson Pratt Journals*, August 23, 1835, 70.
18. Orson Pratt to Oliver Cowdery, February 16, 1835, in *Orson Pratt Journals*, 47.
19. *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, ed. Parley P. Pratt Jr. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 33; emphasis in original.
20. Letter from “Calvin and Peter,” *Evening and Morning Star*, February 1833, 69. These missionaries are understood to be Calvin Beebe and Peter Dustin from a letter dated December 11, 1832, 63.
21. *Journals of William E. McLellin*, May 19, 1833, 122.
22. *Journals of William E. McLellin*, October 19, 1834, 142.
23. *Journals of William E. McLellin*, October 28, 1834, 145.
24. *Orson Pratt Journals*, July 7, 1833, 20.
25. *Orson Pratt Journals*, March 27, 1834, 37.
26. *Orson Pratt Journals*, March 1, 1835, 49.

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27. *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, 122.
28. *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, 149.
29. "Sixth General Epistle of the Church . . . to the Saints Scattered Abroad," September 22, 1851, in Church Historian's Office, History of the Church, 1839–about 1882; see also Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, September 22, 1851, 71, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.
30. Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, March 23, 1846, in Scott H. Faulring, "The Return of Oliver Cowdery," in *Oliver Cowdery: Scribe, Elder, Witness*, ed. John W. Welch and Larry E. Morris (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2006), 331.
31. George A. Smith to Orson Pratt, about November 1848, 78, correspondence in Church Historian's Office.
32. Oliver Cowdery to Samuel W. Richards, January 13, 1849, in *Improvement Era*, October 1914; see Journal History, January 13, 1849, 2.
33. George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph, the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 75. According to the private journal of Oliver B. Huntington, President Wilford Woodruff once grappled with the question of the timing of the restoration of the higher priesthood. "Some people suppose that [1831] was the time that Joseph and Oliver [were] ordained to the Apostleship by Peter, James and John, thereby inferring that the Church was organized before [the] Melchizedek Priesthood was given; which is all wrong simply because some people want to criticize and find something wrong. The Melchizedek Priesthood was given before the Church was organized, in 1829 or March 1830." Diary of Oliver B. Huntington, March 3, 1883, 210–11, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library.
34. J. Reuben Clark Jr., *On the Way to Immortality and Eternal Life* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1961), 144.
35. For a fuller discussion of this topic, see Richard E. Bennett, *School of the Prophet: Joseph Smith Learns the First Principles, 1820–1830* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 83–108.
36. Addison Everett to Oliver B. Huntington, February 17, 1881, in Oliver Boardman Huntington, journal 14, January 31, 1881, L. Tom Perry Special Collections,

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Harold B. Lee Library. See also O. B. Huntington, diary 15, February 18, 1883, 44–47, where the letter is again recorded with few additional particulars. See also Addison Everett to Joseph F. Smith, January 16, 1882, Joseph F. Smith Collection, Church History Library. I am indebted to Larry C. Porter for the above information. For a full discussion of the Everett letters and the restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods, see Larry C. Porter, “The Restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods,” *Ensign*, December 1996, 30–47.

37. In the original Book of Commandments, section 20 shows the word “Apostle” capitalized. Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations*, vol. 1 of the Manuscript Revelation Series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 77.
38. See *Revelations and Translations*, 76–77.
39. Parley P. Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:44.
40. Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:256.
41. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:70.
42. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:361.
43. *Journal History*, April 6, 1853, 6–8.
44. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 9:364–65.
45. Minutes of a Meeting of the Twelve and Seventy, November 30, 1847, Brigham Young Papers, Church History Library.
46. Minutes of a Meeting of the Twelve, December 5, 1847, Brigham Young Papers, Church History Library; see also Richard E. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri—Winter Quarters, 1846–1852* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 210, 308.